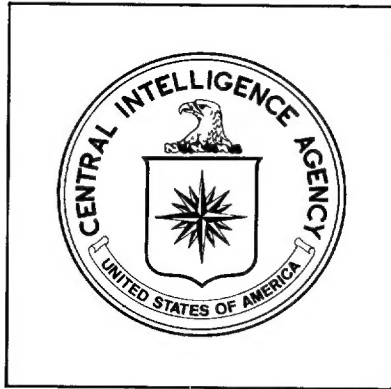


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No. 0686/75
June 5, 1975

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MIDDLE EAST - AFRICA - SOUTH ASIA

This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Middle East - Africa Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Liberia

Steve Tolbert's Passing Leaves a Power Vacuum

The sudden death last April of Finance Minister Stephen Tolbert, President William Tolbert's forceful younger brother, has created a potentially serious vacuum in the power structure of the President's 3 1/2-year-old regime. "Steve" was the President's principal adviser on a wide range of matters and, in effect, was the de facto prime minister. The direction of the cabinet and many important state decisions were entrusted to him.

President Tolbert and his cabinet ministers are now deeply preoccupied with the matter of redistributing the power that Steve exercised. The President, at this point, appears to be moving to try to fill the gap himself. For example, he has given the important finance portfolio to a junior official who lacks independent influence and is beholden to the President for his new appointment. Although Tolbert may seek to assume much of Steve's extensive power, it is too early to tell whether he has the ability to lead the country and get things done solely on his own.

Some of the cabinet minister, meanwhile, are beginning to jostle with one another for pre-eminence--particularly Minister of State For Presidential Affairs Townsend and Foreign Minister Dennis. The President may find that one of these contenders has the ability and forceful personality that will inspire his trust and enable Tolbert to lean on him for support and advice. (CONFIDENTIAL)



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India

Mrs. Gandhi's 1971 Election Challenged in Court

Prime Minister Gandhi faces a court decision sometime this month over violations she allegedly committed in her successful campaign for reelection to parliament in 1971. The charges were brought against her by an opponent in the election. The verdict, by a court in Mrs. Gandhi's home state, could range all the way from dismissal of the case to nullification of her victory. The latter verdict would also disqualify her from holding or contesting a parliamentary seat. There are, however, a number of steps Mrs. Gandhi could legally take to retain the prime ministership while appealing to the supreme court to reverse the decision.

The state judge hearing the case is noted for his integrity and is thought to be quite capable of handling down a verdict against Mrs. Gandhi. Some journalists and leaders of the ruling Congress Party maintain that there is at least an even chance of a negative ruling, and they report Mrs. Gandhi is making contingency plans for an appeal to the supreme court. The latter court is dominated by Mrs. Gandhi's appointees and is most unlikely to rule against her, particularly if her political survival is at stake.

While awaiting a supreme court decision, Mrs. Gandhi could choose to step down in favor of an interim prime minister acceptable to her--an unprecedented move for an Indian prime minister. She would probably assume the Congress Party presidency during that period and thus continue to control party decisions. Another option would allow the election commissioner, one of Mrs. Gandhi's appointees, to waive the restriction disqualifying her from holding a seat in parliament, enabling her to run for reelection right away. This approach, however, could be politically damaging to her. Conceivably, she might simply dissolve parliament and schedule new elections in six months, by which time a supreme court decision, presumably favorable, would be handed down.
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